

ESSAY | William Safire

Free the Baltics

CHICAGO

In light of the decennial eruption that threatens Communism in China, the newly elected delegates to this week's Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow are hard pressed by a challenge to Communist rule much closer to home: a courageous independence movement is sweeping the Baltic States.

Last November, Estonia's legislature passed a law asserting its right to veto Kremlin decisions and its people's right to private property. Moscow promptly declared that heresy invalid, but last week — defying a commission set up to delimit autonomy in Soviet republics — the Parliament of Lithuania went even further, declaring itself not only economically autonomous but "sovereign."

This breathtaking defiance of Soviet rule has gone largely unremarked in the West, but Moscow is profoundly concerned. The Kremlin directed a legal academician to warn in Pravda this week that such "complete separation" from Moscow rule provided justification for a crackdown by unidentified hard-liners "who long to turn the screw" and call for "a firm hand." The Kremlin's threat is palpable: "sovereignty" — the assertion of not only cultural autonomy but national freedom — will trigger a harsh Soviet response.

In the United States, the don't-make-waves set wants us to button our lip on internal turmoil within Communist countries, lest we encourage demonstrations that elicit violent repression. "Restraint on both sides" is urged when the only side threatening violence is a central tyranny.

Pusillanimous evenhandedness is uncalled for in this case because the Baltic challenge is not a Soviet "internal affair." The Baltic States are free and independent nations that were illegally awarded to Stalin by Hitler; the U.S. and many other democracies have never recognized the 1939 Molotov-von Ribbentrop pact.

Our sustained policy of non-recognition has active diplomatic expression. The legitimate former Governments of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia have legations in the U.S., supported by funds here denied the puppet regime a half-century ago. U.S. diplomats in the Soviet Union have always refused to meet the Baltic Communist usurpers; Baltic affairs are dealt with in our State Department's Eastern European section, and are pointedly not part of "Soviet Affairs."

I put a probe into State yesterday and received this official response: "The United States does not recognize the forcible incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union which occurred in 1940. The Baltic peoples have

never accepted the loss of their freedom and liberty. We strongly support their peaceful efforts to regain control over their own destiny."

So far, so firm; but follow-up questions about reaction to the startling reassertion of sovereignty get only a bland "we are watching developments with interest and sympathy," and official comment on the ominous warning in Pravda degenerates into terminal fudge-factory dithering: "That, too, is part of change and adjustment to change."

That is what is said when you have not decided what to do. President

Offer more than tea and sympathy.

Bush can do plenty, but his Administration has failed to focus on this crucial test of Soviet imperial intentions.

Centrifugalism in the Baltic States is not the same as the yearning for freedom in Soviet Georgia, or Armenia, or even the Ukraine. Because the first uprisings in Georgia and Armenia were crushed in what we recognize to be the Soviet Union, a case (a weak case) is made for limiting our reaction to hand-wringing and discreet cluck-clucking at Soviet brutality in those Soviet Socialist republics.

But the push for freedom in the Baltics has a different base in law. Our official position is that these are occupied lands; we should show at least as much concern for the well-being of their nonviolent citizenry as we do for the rock-throwers in what we call the "occupied" West Bank. (We can hope that newspapers will dateline future reports from "Soviet-occupied Riga.")

Mr. Bush, consistent with U.S. policy of a half-century, should make plain to Mr. Gorbachev that it is hypocritical to denounce Stalin's crimes while perpetuating them. The occupation of the Baltic States is an indisputable international crime that should be redressed right now.

In concert with the leading democracies, the U.S. President should invite the non-governmental leaders of the Baltic independence movements to be honored observers at the economic summit meeting this summer, and publicly plan now to receive them in Western capitals. By making them famous, we increase their strength.

A great struggle has begun; if our place is on the sidelines, we can at least get off the bench and cheer. □